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Words at Work: The Dynamics of Company-Speak in the Work Place

Abstract

This paper outlines the pragmaterminological approach of terms in companies and organizations as an efficient way to study situated, dynamic elements conveying sense and meaning for knowledge and communication purposes in the workplace, and making up what we will call company-speak. Broadly speaking, we will define company-speak as the specific sociolect used in a specific company or organization to work and do business and reflecting the ongoing construction of its own knowledge, corporate culture, and identity. Company-speak is truly unique and every single company or organization will develop its own company-speak that competing companies or organizations operating in the same sector or branch of activity cannot and will not use. Particularly, the pragmaterminological approach aims at answering the question of what exactly has to be known to work at micro-level in work communities, and how knowledge must be shared to cope with knowledge asymmetries and ensure cooperation between experts within the company or organization.

Keywords

1.   Introduction

In the workplace, staff produce and exchange specialized messages of many kinds to accomplish work tasks. Linguistic messages are generally the most perceivable as they appear in professional conversations and texts, but other meaning elements are also used, which are necessary for work. Signs of many different types contribute to the construction of meaning and messages, and must be perceived, recognized, and understood as central contributions to the ever-changing communication of companies and organizations (from now on C&Os). Staff may speak and write, but they can also use gestures, sounds, or images to convey messages about their tasks depending on the situation. The question which needs to be answered here is: what do staff need to know to work in this company or organization right now? The answer is the general faculty of language in the saussurian sense of the term, and not only natural language.

As the scientific study of terms in specific fields of knowledge, a general theory of terminology appears to be particularly appropriate to study the nature of knowledge and communication elements needed in the workplace. Still, the theory has to be adapted to take working situations into account. Strongly influenced by "general" terminological theories of terminology, pragmaterminology offers an original way to investigate those elements that specifically construct and govern staff knowledge and communication as needed at work.

This novel approach requires reconsidering fundamental elements of terminology, namely, notions of field of knowledge, term, concept, and expert. The pragmaterminological approach embraces the semiotic reality in the workplace as staff really use it. Besides, speakers are not always aware of standardization, linguistic policies or the fact that they use a specialized language in the

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form of a sociolect. They simply speak the way they do because they have to do so individually in connection with their daily tasks. They do so according to the knowledge and communication needs of C&Os that shape their reality and create new real or abstract "objects" needing designations. Managers, consumers, employees must identify them, and such identifications are a crucial part of the knowledge needed in the workplace. Meaning and communication elements making up company-speak can be part of a general language or special language of a given field, but can also have fuzzy borders to these due to the heterogeneous linguistic and semiotic reality of people at work. As such, these elements can be difficult to categorize. When deprived of them, messages become useless and cannot be interpreted correctly. Thus, we will call company-speak the social dialect that reflects the knowledge and culture of a working community as it is constructed socially. Pragmaterminology aims at the study of terms that designate concepts needed in the construction of a community working knowledge, and of rules governing their use. In other words, it aims at the study of genuinely situated words and other semiotic units at work in the workplace.

It is necessary then to redefine the concept of workplace as a community of speakers, and that of field of knowledge as the place in which the community applies its knowledge, including the concepts they use and produce, and the terms designating them precisely the way they do. Terms circulate then in a closed circuit in which their meaning and praxis are limited to the community. One company does not speak the same way as a competitor does, and consequently company-speak reflects corporate culture and identity in an even more accurate manner than a given natural language normally does for the general culture of its speakers.

2. Speaking of company-speak: towards a definition

2.1. Language vs natural language in the workplace

In daily conversations and professional interactions, staff mix expressions from different areas and may use different communication systems. Languages are then most important, but it is necessary to have a clear view of what languages are in order to fully understand the nature of communication in the workplace.

Following Saussure (1916), we distinguish between language (*langage*) as the faculty of using signs resulting from social conventions and natural language (*langue*) as a virtual system of signs and ways of combining them that speakers use to express their thoughts. The term "speaker" should be taken in a broad sense, as it is actually possible for speakers to apply the faculty of representing thoughts otherwise than with linguistic, acoustic signs. This is indeed the case in C&Os, where other channels than oral or written texts are used when linguistic channels are not available or badly suited. A pilot taxiing an aircraft interprets the meaning of the different signs given by the marshal guiding him as a language, and follows them accordingly. Similarly, a railway employee at a station platform guides the train driver to accurately position the train. Even if such non-verbal situations are not so frequent for non-professionals, they do exist in a number of working activities. Observing communication in the workplace must take into account every communication mean in working communities. Natural language is but one part of these means.

In the workplace, staff use natural language to express everyday life and knowledge needed at work. In other words, they mix a language for general purposes (LGP) and a language for special purposes (LSP) (Cabré, 1993; Lerat, 1995; Sager, 1990) of their field in a continuum, so it is not always easy to clearly hold them apart. Between these two forms of natural language lies a less perceived semiotic system that includes a significant amount of genuine expressions corresponding exactly to the profile of the C&O itself, and to its corporate culture and identity. Working in a company or organization requires more than just everyday language and specific knowledge. A C&O has developed its own linguistic needs because staff have to to designate items, entities and phenomena of the reality of their work environment. Focusing on linguistic needs alone tends to hide for the fact that many expressions fail to be perceived as essential or characteristic as they should. Yet, they shape the whole communicative environment of the working place. It is conse-

quently crucial to know how work communities shape and transform LGP and LSP for their own knowledge needs and communicative purposes.

2.2. Designations with a specific value

The most visible part of designations having a specific value are the names of products and services. Clearly, a company cannot sell its products identifying them with the names used by a competitor. The fast food company McDonald's (MC 2020) sells *Gran Big Mac™* and *Smarties McFlurry™*, but certainly nothing as *Double Whopper®* or *Mini Oreo© Fusion.* These are solely sold by Burger King. (BK 2020) Whether units like these should be treated as proper nouns or not is irrelevant here because staff must in any case know, recognize and use them. They enter in their professional discourse and govern its articulation. Such obvious examples hide another linguistic reality, namely the way different usual words carry special meanings in different fast-food companies. Both above-mentioned companies sell *burgers* and *desserts.* As such, they belong to LGP. However, these words designate categories of products that do not mirror the same realities because companies are unique. They may use different ingredients, apply different procedures, and manage different commercial practices and business models. All these factors contribute to the existence of that particular product designated in a particular way. LGP does not take into account such knowledge, which is not constitutive of the semantics of the category (a predicate), but is constitutive of the knowledge of the world of the company. Albeit staff need to know what the precise meaning of *burgers* and *desserts* is in order to work in the company in question, usual words like these are not perceived and interpreted as being part of a LSP of cookery either. In fact, they respond precisely to the designation needs of every single company. In other words and to put it shortly: You cannot sell McDonald's speaking Burger King. In addition, it is not just useless jargon, but part of a body of valuable knowledge staff need to know to be fully operational.

This shows that the semantics of words in isolation and of words at work in a company are embedded in each other and cannot be separated, as this is usually done, for instance in lexicography where a distinction is normally made between word knowledge and world knowledge (also called encyclopedic knowledge). Company-speak is a case of situated, intertwined semantics, and separation between linguistics and knowledge of the world makes no sense because pragmatics by and large is predominant.

A single lexical item like *burger* is the name of a particular type of sandwich and designates a category of sandwiches for which the referents and ways to produce them are far from being the same in the conceptual framework of companies. The same goes for *dessert*, *products*, *cars*, *women*, *men*, *children, body* and myriads of common words (often in plural but not only) used, for example, for internet tabs on websites. Sometimes they may simply represent a short form of a larger designation. For example *women's clothes* or *body products.* Furniture shops do not categorize nor designate pieces of furniture in the same way (*shelving units / bookcases*; *beds / bedroom*).

Acronyms, which are commonly perceived as being characteristic of the way C&Os use language, are also designations. *Sport Utility Vehicle* (*SUV*) or *Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus* (*SCUBA*) are noun phrases composed of three or five lexical items needed to designate this type of automobile or breathing device. As far as acronyms are concerned, it is wrong to claim that an acronym is the name of something. Rather, it is a syntactical syntagmatic construction referring to something, except when the construction becomes fully lexicalized, like in *radar*, *sonar*, *GATT*, etc., and considered as a common noun.

Words and expressions used by a working community to communicate reveal the true productive nature of its company-speak, the sociolect that mirrors the dynamic construction of its corporate culture and identity. Yet, company-speak is often perceived, not as an asset, but as a jargon, therefore conveying a pejorative connotation.

Since expressions that working communities use to communicate embody its company-speak, it can be considered as the social dialect that corresponds to its corporate culture and identity. It is often dismissed as a jargon, thereby conveying a pejorative connotation.

Some authors, for instance Loewenstein (2014) follow a social approach and analyze professional jargons in C&Os as a vocabulary, i.e. words with a history of use within a social collective. Others (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015) look at it from a technical angle as a specific vocabulary, acronyms, terminologies, and technical words. Brannen & Doz mention "firm-specific usages of words, phrases, acronyms, stories, or examples that areclear to insiders but not to those who lack a shared organizational experience" (2012:80). Aichhorn & Puck (2017) also take vocabulary, terminology, and expressions into account, but rightly include an organizational perspective with communicative norms of spoken and written interactions. In management and language studies, most research concerns language as a whole system whereas research into the nature of the system itself is the exception rather than the rule. There is much literature about English as a Lingua Franca, business languages, multilingualism, languages and cultures, interactions, but not much is said about the way lexical units, designations and their discursive aspects actually work within companies. Or how they fit together. There is a gap to fill.

Besides the use of current expressions in natural languages, staff also need to know how to use many other signs that carry meaning necessary in their work. This concerns nomenclatures like types of planes, Boeing *B-777* [in words, Boeing seven hundred seven] Airbus *A-380* [airbus three hundred eighty], Peugeot cars *108* [hundred eight] or *3008* [three thousand eight]. Other signs can be gestures when other communication channels are unavailable (railway maneuvers or airplanes marshalling), icons when words are not the best solution (phone, hotel, bed, save, print, assembly instructions, etc.) and sound signals (De Vecchi, 2015). Company-speak is the network of all multimodal semiotic elements expressed or not in natural language and needed by staff and management in order to work in a company or organization and be fully operational here and now (De Vecchi, 2015, 2016).

Alongside with these elements, local slang and internal company slang are also very much present in company-speak. Although difficult to identify and comprehend, slang plays a central role in many professional, oral interactions, and could be seen as a case of register, or perhaps even code switching. Consequently, many different types of colloquial expressions are used, particularly in conversations and not only in written documents. For a staff member to engage in a conversation like in the examples below (1a & 2a) requires a deep knowledge of the company, its sectors and its activities. As a result, any mistake or inaccuracy committed by staff members will immediately reveal a lack of appropriate knowledge and jeopardize organizational communication.

> (1a) For 46 years I was a F/A! 21 with PAA and 25 with the Widget! Not bad with PAA! I would do enough SA on Fat Albert! Then we merged with NAL. Then it was CDG! I never did F/C. And even less the galleys. I started to have seniority, so it was fine. The worst were the pax! Especially from PAX in Bermuda and Flip-flops! The best times: the landings and the layovers!

> (2a) I just got my rotations (patters, in my former life). I have two back to back a carry-in and I need a carry-over. Swap board. I also have AQ. I hope they do not ask me to shimmy down the Mad dog. They might in CQ. At least I do not have A. Days!

Company-speak is multimodal and strongly heterogeneous. It is made up of a number of very different meaning elements that are used and combined to create professional meaning and make sense in a company or organization. This include common and proper names, acronyms, phrases, nomenclatures, icons, gestures, sounds. As explained earlier, these elements create a network that has to be known and mastered by members of professional communities to execute their tasks, work properly and communicate efficiently.

In order to adequately explain how company-speak is formed and used in business activities and communication and to account for its extensive variation and heterogeneity, we need a polysemiotic theory, i.e. a theory which is not solely limited to the study of linguistics signs, but also

includes other signs than language. Lexicography – and its specialized counterpart terminography – normally deals with natural language as it is instantiated in texts and does not extend its selection and description to semiotic units beyond language. Such non-verbal units however play a crucial part in the formation and usage of company speak, as they clearly are at work in numerous business activities and related business communication. Therefore, a comprehensive theory of terminology should include the study of linguistic as well as non-linguistic elements, as both participate to the knowledge construction and communication which is at the heart of work activities in a company or organization.

3.   Towards a semiotic extension of general terminological theory

Terminology as a science is the study of terms in a field of knowledge (Wüster, 1998; Felber 1987, Rey 1992; Sager, 1990; ISO 1087). Although correct, this definition is not sufficiently adequate for the study of words at work. In the case of companies and organizations, it is necessary to extend the concepts of term, field and knowledge. In a company or organization as a work place, staff express what *they know* in many different ways. They use a vast range of signs. Considering multiple semiotic productions as representations of *staff knowledge* allows us to investigate various interpretations of communication situations. What signs does a company or organization use to represent its knowledge and ensure its communication needs? In other words, who knows what, and how does staff communicate its knowledge and to whom? The scope of knowledge construction and communication goes far beyond what we normally name discourse in natural language. A company or organization is a work place in which many fields of knowledge may apply at the same time, and staff has to know more than a single field when executing the different phases of their tasks.

3.1.   Knowledge and fields of knowledge

The whole discussion on what knowledge is constitutes in itself a comprehensive issue, and we cannot address it here. For our purpose and in the framework of C&Os we will define knowledge as the theoretical and practical capacity of staff to accomplish tasks in which they are truly "experts". To make it possible to do their work, to speak and communicate about their expertise, experts have to manage many types of semiotic elements. Among these, linguistic elements become part of a discourse, which is culturally characteristic of the community at work (private company, institution, NGO, public administration, etc.). For this reason, simple words like "burger", "body", "seniority", "product" or "building" convey much more information than their default semantics. So do collocations, with their collocators and collocates (De Vecchi & Estachy 2008). Expressions like *to be in a building* or *to have seniority* mean much more than their literal sense. *Building* can be linked to *access procedures*, and *seniority* to specific *number of years*. In both cases, the pragmatic aspects of the meaning units *building* and *seniority* are particularly salient in the company's organizational life and culture. Staff know more than the meaning of "words".

   At this point, it necessary to identify where and how C&Os use their knowledge to do their job, and how signs representing it circulate. Physics explains the way airplanes fly, but the knowledge a captain needs to pilot an airline's aircraft besides physics include transportation regulations and a number of internal procedures. Different knowledge fields interact in such a situation. Aviation as a field of knowledge comprises different fields of activities in which knowledge becomes even more specific (i.e. civil, military, passengers' transportation or sport aviation). Also, a single field of activity (passenger transportation) comprises different fields of operation (De Vecchi, 2004). Although closely related, a large field or domain of knowledge as physics cannot take into consideration all aspects needed to become operational. An airline company as a field of operations comprises not only physics, but many other fields as well (regulations, commerce, marketing, human resources, finance, etc.) and all of these together generate the company-speak that is precisely needed by the company. The question then is to assess what knowledge exactly

is needed to do the work here and now, and what it means, for this specific company and in this particular situation when running its business. The answer is definitely more than linguistics expressions. Natural language is only part of corporate culture and many other types of languages have to work together.

3.2. Communities, knowledge, and knowledge asymmetries

A big company brings together a number of communities that each have their own knowledge. They have to collaborate and interact with each other to make sure activities succeed. Except in the case of self-employed workers, where all tasks are carried out by a single entrepreneur, communities rarely work isolated from each other throughout the chain of actions that is required by the field of operation. Working closely together and collaborating are key issues to success. In this sense, business is the collaborated result of marketing studies, research and development activities, human resource management, investment strategies and decisions and so on. In companies and organizations, the main knowledge of a field is modified, adapted and applied in a chain going from a field of knowledge to a field of operations, where it interacts with others. Experts have their own knowledge in every single field and understand enough from other experts to interact with them. This is what Roqueplo calls *savoir décalé* (1990) or knowledge asymmetry, which is at the heart of collaboration between experts. If an expert is an expert in his field, (s)he also needs to understand what others do and express when doing their part of the work.

3.3. Conceptualization vs concept – the dynamics of company-speak

Change communication is at the heart of organizational communication. The life and dynamics of a company or organization are the result of ongoing changes in products and services in pace with technological evolutions or even disruptions, as well as changes in society make ideas evolve constantly, eventually leading to the transformation of business models. The way of thinking a product or a service, identifying it and designating it is not static. The Honda team in charge of the Honda City car chose to name their project *Tall Boy* for a car, which should be "tall and short" at the same time. This has profoundly changed ever since our way of thinking what a city vehicle should look like (Nonaka, 1991). The ideas of "tall, short, man-maximum, and machine-minimum" were part of what we can consider a conceptualization process, the conceptual DNA that ended up with the birth of the Honda City car. In other words, the "tall boy" conceptualization of the *Honda City* and its phrasing is an exclusive creation, which is not to be found anywhere else among other carmaker competitors. Such situations are quite frequent in the life of companies or organization, but not well documented nor taken seriously. They are mainly referred to orally as anecdotes and not recognized for their semiotic power.

It is the communication situation that brings into reality the abstract marketing notion of "concept" as the unique underlying set of ideas governing the creation of unique services or products. Research and development make concepts evolve constantly, and new technology leads to new designation needs. This goes for instance for mobile telephone technology which has evolved from G2 to G5. Processes leading to needs for new designations are equally important as the designations themselves. What matters in the workplace is a clear understanding of processes that bring a product or service into existence, because the immaterial part is actually what is sold on the market, i.e. a genuine, singular way of seeing what is behind the product or service, and the key to its business model.

3.4. Terms, multimodality and their processing

There is no consensus on the definition of what a term is, and authors express different views. We will in the following shortly focus on some of these views through various definitions.

ISO 704-2009, 7.2.1, defines terms as follows:

> A term is a designation consisting of one or more words representing a general concept in a special language in a specific subject field.

Whereas for ISO 1087-1, 3.4.3, it is a:

> verbal esignation (3.4.1) of a general concept (3.2.3) in a specific subject field (3.1.2) NOTE A term may contain symbols and can have variants, e.g. different forms of spelling.

Both definitions are determined by the semiotics of linguistics. For Cabré also (1993:171) a term is a semiotic unit (*unidad sígnica*) that can be analyzed linguistically. For Temmerman the view is cognitive, as the term is taken to be a unit of understanding (2000:223). Staff needs knowledge to work. They represent and communicate that knowledge through signs of different types that designate objects (real or abstract) used in their community. A term is the semiotic result (sign) of a conceptualization process which experts carry out in their own field to designate relevant objects. Terms convey the understanding a community needs in order to manage its knowledge and make communication possible through knowledge communication.

The internal field of knowledge of a community within a company or organization may evolve rapidly. Research and development projects, commercial and manufacturing procedures are normally confidential and not easily accessible from outside the company. In these processes, linguistic expressions coexist with nomenclatures and other types of signs. Printed documents are not the only medium in which terms appear; oral interactions are even more important. It is difficult though to access written text data, and terminological research often requires anonymization of these, whereas oral interactions between experts may reveal many units not used in written documents (De Vecchi, forthcoming), but which nevertheless are essential to understand how knowledge discourse is constructed and shared in the work place.

If we remove terms from a professional text (written or spoken), then the text tends to become meaningless. This shows the crucial role of terms and demonstrates that what is referred to as a jargon actually is not. The examples below (1b & 2b) reveals what might happen to the extract of conversation we have used in a previous section (1a & 2a). Without their collocates, collocators do not make any sense:

> (1b) For 46 years I was a F/A! 21 with PAA and 25 with the Widget! Not bad with PAA! I would do enough SA on Fat Albert! Then we merged with NAL. Then it was CDG! I never did F/C. And even less the galleys. I started to have seniority, so it was fine. The worst were the pax! Especially from PAX in Bermuda and Flip-flops! The best times: the landings and the layovers!

> (2b) I just got my rotations (patters, in my former life). I have two back to back a carry-in and I need a carry-over. Swap board. I also have AQ. I hope they do not ask me to shimmy down the Mad dog. They might in CQ. At least I do not have A. Days!

Clearly, experts cannot communicate without terms. It is even more difficult for them to say what they have to say in external communication situations in which they have to find equivalents of their terms. Staff with seniority do not perceive the terms they use as weird, simply because they are extensively used to them. Consequently, this makes data generation necessary for the study of company-speak even more difficult. It is hard to find a speaker who is truly conscious of the existence of terms and can produce a text containing many of them. At the same time, company-speak works as an obstacle for newcomers (De Vecchi, 2019). Also, since a company or organization can be clearly identified by the genuine expressions it uses (De Vecchi, 2002), company-speak is extremely useful for benchmarking purposes, where functional equivalence between companies can be established. *They* say *this* in *that* way.

In C&Os, studying terms supporting knowledge must necessarily rely on a close observation of small communities of experts and micro-fields, i.e. in limited, local situations in which experts express and apply what they know. It can concern a procedure, the characteristics of a material, the description of objects, etc. Large terminological databases cannot easily take into account what happens in-house in every single company or organization, and even less in a small workshop or

engineers' office. The solution here would be to develop in house term record systems (Leroyer & de Vecchi 2015). Besides, there is no reason to standardize terms supporting the knowledge of such small groups outside the company or organization. Specific signs used by staff to refer to the way they do their job and to singular production processes remain in a close circuit.

It appears by now that the study of company-speak necessitates new perspectives on the analysis of terms. Beyond the need for fundamental linguistic analysis claimed by Cabré, which builds on formal, semantic and functional descriptions (1993:171), we claim that terms belonging to company-speak need to include the following comprehensive aspects in order to fully render their complex, multimodal construction, and to explain rules governing their genesis and usage.

1. Linguistic and cognitive aspects, namely the forms of the signs conveying sense and constructing knowledge as units of understanding. This concerns forms, shapes, colors, sounds and possible local semiotic varieties – as well as definitions making use of multilayered conceptual descriptions.

2. All social aspects related to the life of internal communities making use of these terms, and their needs for term understanding.

3. Pragmatic aspects, which include actions to be performed according to corporate culture and identity: *we do this in this way*, therefore, *these are 'our words'*. Here collocates have a major role to play.

4. Diachronic aspects concerning the validity and use of terms as dynamic units. Technologies quickly evolve and designations need to bring up new terms making old ones obsolete. One term replaces another, even if it becomes part of the history of the corporate culture.

4.   Concluding remarks: the 'raison d'être' of company-speak

Thinking of the workplace as a knowledge community that communicates thanks to its own sociolect – company-speak – provides a novel approach to terminology, as terms are genuinely processed as knowledge and communication units. Pragmaterminology treats terms differently in its tenets, because it is not from the outside to the inside that terms appear in a C&O. Generic fields and domains of knowledge do not necessarily need the knowledge of C&Os, but C&Os do need this knowledge to operate. Only, they need it in their own way. And to do so, they generate and use company-speak to do their job properly and ultimately to support the knowledge oriented sense making processes which are the raison d'être of communication in C&Os.

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